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SUBJECT: NORTHEAST INDIA DOES NOT FAVOR CONGRESS, LEFT'S STRENGTH
REINFORCED

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: In the Northeast Indian state of Meghalaya, the incumbent Congress-led government was again sworn in despite its lack of majority in the state legislature. In neighboring Nagaland, the Democratic Alliance of Nagaland (DAN), a BJP coalition, which was ousted in January when the UPA placed the state under Central Rule, won a majority. In Tripura, the Left Front inflicted a crushing defeat on the Congress for the fourth consecutive time. Although the three Northeast states are small, the Congress Party's electoral debacle in the region is a warning that early general elections may not work in its favor. The Left leadership's recent statements on the possible formation of a third front may find some credence with the Left, proving that it retains its dominance in its eastern India strongholds. End Summary.

Meghalaya

¶2. (U) On March 10, the Congress under D.D. Lapang formed a government in Meghalaya without a majority and without the confirmed support of regional parties. With only 25 legislators in a legislature of 60, Lapang has 10 days to prove his majority. Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) leader, former Parliament Speaker and Meghalaya political heavyweight P.A. Sangma, who heads a rival coalition with 31 legislators strongly protested the development. He had informed Governor S.S. Sidhu of the strength of his coalition, but the Governor decided that Sangma's coalition did not constitute a pre-poll alliance and therefore did not deserve precedence over the single-largest vote-getter, Congress. Sangma said he will file a petition with the India Supreme Court to challenge the decision.

¶3. (U) The NCP and the regional parties - United Democratic Party (UDP), Hill State People's Democratic Party (HSPDP), Khun Hynniewtrep National Awakening Movement (KHNAM), BJP and two independents have now formed the Meghalaya Progressive Alliance. Results for 59 seats have been announced: NCP(15), UDP(11), HSPDP(2), and KHNAM(1). The BJP won one seat and Independents won four.

Nagaland

¶4. (U) Despite Congress' efforts to undermine the incumbent Democratic Alliance of Nagaland (DAN) through the pre-election imposition of President's Rule, DAN and its BJP ally emerged as the front-runner to form the next Nagaland government. Of the 57 results announced so far for seats in the 60-member Assembly,

the Nagaland People's Front (NPF), which heads the DAN, won 25 spots while Congress won 22. The NCP and BJP secured two seats each. Six independents also won from their respective constituencies.

Tripura

¶5. (U) On March 10, the Left Front government was sworn into government for the fourth consecutive time. The Left Front won a total of 49 seats in the 60 member assembly -- CPM(46), RSP(2), and CPI(1). The opposition Congress fared poorly (10) and its partner Indigenous Nationalist Party of Tripura (INPT) managed a single seat. The INPT is the political arm of the tribal militant National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT). CPM leaders hailed the Left Front's victory, and said that the verdict was a lesson to the Congress for trying to divide the state into tribals and non-tribals (Tripura's population is 30 per cent tribal and 70 per cent Bengali).

¶6. (SBU) Comment: With a crushing defeat in Tripura and lackluster performances in Nagaland and in Meghalaya where it did not get a clear majority, the Congress failed in its once traditional political base among the Northeast Indian states. This disappointing performance follows thumping defeats the Congress suffered in Gujarat and Himachal last December. The Northeast losses must be especially disheartening for the Congress, which had hoped to boost party morale with some "small wins" on its home turf. These losses will no doubt factor into the Congress High Command's decision on the timing of a general election. Clearly, the Congress Party is stumbling into its final year in office floundering and enfeebled. Whether national elections are early or on schedule in May 2009, it is apparent the Congress Party needs some major refurbishment if it is to remain competitive. Its latest strategy appears to be to ride the coat-tails of the super-populist "please-all" budget

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that it unveiled on the eve of the polls in the Northeast. The strategy did not work in the Northeast, thus supporting the view of many analysts who believe that the Indian voter is too savvy and sophisticated to be taken in by such cynical election-time pandering.

¶7. (SBU) The Left Front's fourth consecutive victory in Tripura is a morale booster for the Left, albeit a small one. Under attack from all quarters for the violent land acquisition battles in West Bengal, the Left Front has once again shown that it remains secure in its own strongholds. The Left leadership's recent statements on the possible formation of a "third alternative" may gain some credence among moderate Left supporters following its Tripura victory, but the Left still needs to define this alternative more clearly to give it a chance at the national level.

JARDINE